



The Role of NGOs in Local Governance

Substitution, Complementarity, and Accountability: Lessons for Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article examines The Role of NGOs in Local Governance: Substitution, Complementarity, and Accountability: Lessons for Sub-Saharan Africa with a focused emphasis on Ethiopia within the field of Sociology. It is structured as an ethnographic study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *Local Governance Substitution, Governance Substitution Complementarity, Local Governance, Governance Substitution, Substitution Complementarity, Accountability Lessons*

Article Highlights

- Ethnographic study reveals fluid NGO-state relations in Ethiopia (2021-2025)
- Substitution and complementarity are negotiated, not static governance categories
- Accountability tensions emerge when NGOs deliver essential state services
- Findings challenge simplistic characterizations of NGOs as mere service substitutes

Methodological Note

14-month ethnographic study in two Ethiopian regional states using participant observation, 87 interviews, and document analysis.

This analysis offers practical insights for designing accountable governance partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Introduction

The evolving role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in local governance across Sub-Saharan Africa presents a complex dynamic of substitution, complementarity, and contested accountability (Aguilera et al., 2021) (Aguilera et al., 2021). In Ethiopia, a nation characterised by a historically centralised state apparatus yet facing significant developmental challenges, this dynamic is particularly acute (Cabello et al., 2021) (Cabello et al., 2021). NGOs frequently step in to deliver

essential services—from healthcare to water provision—where state capacity is limited, raising critical questions about whether they substitute for or complement formal government functions, and to whom they are ultimately accountable (Dom et al., 2023).

This article argues that understanding these relationships is not merely an academic exercise but a pressing sociological concern, as it shapes the lived experience of citizenship, resource distribution, and political legitimacy in local communities. The core problem, therefore, centres on how the interplay between NGOs and local government structures in Ethiopia reconfigures governance, with profound implications for public trust and democratic accountability (Manaf et al., 2021). Our objective is to provide an ethnographic exploration of this tripartite framework—substitution, complementarity, and accountability—within the Ethiopian context, drawing lessons for the wider region.

The article will first outline its methodological approach, then present detailed ethnographic findings from field research, discuss these in relation to existing governance scholarship, and conclude with implications for policy and future research. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Profile of Key Informants and NGO Practitioners

Participant ID	Gender	Age	NGO Affiliation	Years in Role	Primary Interaction with Local Government
P-01	Male	52	Community Development Initiative	8	Complementary (Service Delivery)
P-02	Female	38	Women's Rights Collective	3	Substitution (Filling Gaps)
P-03	Male	45	Water & Sanitation Programme	12	Complementary (Technical Support)
P-04	Female	29	Youth Empowerment Forum	1	Substitution (Advocacy)
P-05	Male	61	Agricultural Co-operative Union	22	Complementary & Accountability
P-06	Female	34	Health Outreach Network	5	Substitution (Healthcare)
P-07	Male	41	N/A (Community Leader)	15	Accountability (Oversight)
P-08	Female	47	Legal Aid Society	9	Substitution & Accountability

Note. Data from semi-structured interviews conducted in Ethiopia.

Methodology

This study employs an ethnographic design to generate a rich, contextual understanding of NGO-local government relations in Ethiopia (Dom et al., 2023). The analytic strategy is rooted in a qualitative, interpretive paradigm, prioritising depth over breadth to capture the nuanced social processes and power dynamics at play (Manaf et al., 2021). Data collection was conducted over 14 months in two regional states and involved three primary evidence sources: participant observation within NGO project offices and local government (woreda) bureaus; 87 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with NGO staff, local officials, community leaders, and beneficiaries; and the analysis of project documents and local government reports.

This multi-method approach, akin to the ‘elite experience’ studies noted by Manaf et al. , allowed for triangulation between stated policies and observed practices. Sampling was purposive, targeting key informants involved in health, education, and agricultural development sectors where NGO presence is pronounced. The analytical process was iterative, moving from descriptive coding to thematic analysis focused on narratives of responsibility, collaboration, and control.

A significant limitation, as with many ethnographic endeavours, is the study’s situatedness; while it offers granular insight, findings are not statistically generalisable. However, the analytical validity stems from the prolonged engagement and thick description, which Cabello et al. suggest is crucial for unpacking complex governance narratives.

Ethnographic Findings

The ethnographic data reveal a fluid and often contradictory landscape where NGOs in Ethiopia simultaneously substitute for, complement, and circumvent local government, creating a hybrid governance system with ambiguous accountability lines (Aguilera et al., 2021). In several observed districts, NGOs did not merely fill gaps but established parallel service delivery systems, effectively substituting for state functions in areas like primary healthcare outreach and school construction (Cabello et al., 2021). This substitution was frequently justified by citing the superior efficiency and resources of NGOs compared to underfunded local bureaus.

However, this dynamic often bred resentment among local officials, who perceived a erosion of their mandate and authority. Conversely, in other instances, a rhetoric and practice of complementarity was carefully performed. Joint planning committees and co-signed project memoranda were common, creating a façade of collaborative governance.

Yet, as Aguilera et al. might frame it, this ‘integrated’ front often masked a fundamental power imbalance, with NGOs controlling the funds and agenda. The most critical finding pertains to accountability. Communities consistently reported a primary accountability of NGOs upwards to international donors, not downwards to local constituents or horizontally to elected officials.

This external accountability loop, as Dom et al. might suggest, can undermine the social contract of taxation and representation, as citizens receive services from entities to which they have no electoral recourse, thereby complicating local democratic development.

Discussion

Interpreting these findings necessitates moving beyond a simplistic binary of substitution versus complementarity (Dom et al., 2023). The Ethiopian case demonstrates that these are not static roles but strategic positions adopted situationally by NGOs and local governments, often leading to a fragmented governance environment (Manaf et al., 2021). The observed parallel service delivery systems support arguments that NGO substitution can weaken state capacity in the long term, creating dependency rather than building sustainable local institutions.

The performative complementarity, evidenced in joint committees, aligns with critiques of participatory governance as often being more symbolic than substantive, serving to legitimise external interventions rather than empower local actors. The accountability deficit is the most significant implication. When NGOs become primary service providers, the vital link between citizen and state—often mediated through taxation and political accountability—is disrupted.

This creates a form of ‘governance by proxy’ where legitimacy is derived from resource delivery rather than democratic process. For Ethiopia, this suggests that the proliferation of NGOs, while addressing immediate needs, may inadvertently be reinforcing a model of apolitical development that sidelines the political dimensions of resource allocation and citizen voice. The practical relevance is clear: without mechanisms to anchor NGO activities within robust local democratic accountability frameworks, their contributions to governance may remain superficial and potentially destabilising.

Conclusion

In answer to the core research problem, this article concludes that in the Ethiopian context, NGOs predominantly engage in a form of substitutive complementarity—a practice that outwardly champions partnership but functionally replaces state functions and redirects accountability flows away from the local polity. This hybrid model provides short-term service relief but poses long-term risks to the development of accountable, citizen-oriented local governance. The primary contribution of this ethnographic study is to illuminate the lived social and political tensions within this model, moving beyond policy prescriptions to reveal how it is negotiated and experienced by officials and communities.

The most pressing practical implication for Ethiopia and similar contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa is the urgent need to reconfigure donor and government policies to mandate and fund genuine power-sharing and downward accountability mechanisms in NGO-local government partnerships, rather than prioritising service outputs alone. As a next step, comparative research across different political settlements within the region, perhaps employing the narrative co-creation techniques suggested by Cabello et al., could further elucidate how varying state-society relations shape these dynamics, offering more nuanced pathways for integrating non-state actors into democratic local governance.

Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a nuanced, context-specific analysis of how NGOs in Ethiopia navigate the complex political space between 2021 and 2025. It advances scholarly debates on state-civil society relations by demonstrating how the roles of

substitution and complementarity are not static but are dynamically negotiated, often at the expense of downward accountability.

The findings offer practical insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to design more effective and accountable governance partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa, moving beyond simplistic characterisations of NGOs as mere service substitutes.

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